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BERGSON AND RELIGION

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Two philosophers are just now dominating public interest, Rudolf Eucken and Henri Bergson. Both are lecturing in America during the present year. Of the two Bergson is the less known and the more unique. He was brought to the attention of the American people by William James, but since the translation of his "Creative Evolution" most intelligent persons have at least a knowledge of his central positions. Professor Macintosh presents the religious bearing of his thought in this lucid article.

The philosophy of Henri Bergson, who visits America this winter, is undoubtedly the most *interesting* system of thought before the thinking world today. The secret of the great attention being given the works of this French philosopher is to be found probably not so much in their remarkable literary charm as in the striking and original character of their thought. Even the non-philosophical are becoming impressed with the idea that here at least is a philosophy which promises to "make a difference"; and philosophers who had devoted long years to the discouraging attempt to produce a system of metaphysics at once scientific and satisfactory to the spirit of man have been stirred up to a renewed discussion of the fundamental nature of reality.

As a matter of fact, Bergson has succeeded in awakening this interest in his ideas chiefly because as a philosopher he has been like the scribe who became a disciple of the new faith; he has qualified himself to bring forth out of his treasure things new and old. He has returned to a philosophical method which is the oldest of the old, while at

the same time he continues to make use of a philosophical category than which it would be difficult to find a newer. The method is the method of mysticism, of intuition; the category is the **category** of life—life in its evolutionary progress, as modern science has taught us to view it. But while new and old are combined in the employment of the old method of mystical intuition together with the new category of evolving life, the method is not entirely old, nor is the category entirely new. Mystical intuition is here presented as the newest development of modern scientific procedure, the most scientific sort of science. Bergson, who has been a laborious investigator of science, and especially of biological and psychological problems, thinks of his own method as being at every step rigidly scientific. On the other hand, into the new biological category the old is brought back, in the idea of *creative* evolution. It is not quite the old idea of creation; but then, that is nothing more than is to be expected in the production of the novel blend of such opposites as are to be found in the philosophy before us.

In speaking of the method as mystical, it was not meant to refer to any particularly religious procedure, but simply to mysticism in the more general sense. The method is to dispense with the well-worn concepts of technical thought, as well as with the discursive processes of reasoning; and, having thus excluded as far as possible the disturbing influence of intellect, to rest in an immediate awareness of the object. To others than himself, the mystical observer may appear illogical, in that he employs concepts to communicate that for the acquiring of which he sought to be rid of all concepts. But to the mystic himself the problem does not present itself as one of logic and consistency. He is fully conscious of the inadequacy of language to express the full content of his "revelation," but necessity is laid upon him, and woe to him if he preach not his gospel! So it has even been with the religious mystic, at any rate; and so, too, it seems to be with Bergson.

In expressing himself, then, the mystic must make use of some concepts, even when he inveighs most against the use of concepts. But these concepts ought to be, says Bergson, "pliant, mobile, almost fluid representations, always ready to adapt themselves to the fleeting forms of intuition." Of the more general concepts, or categories, the one which commends itself to our philosopher as least objectionable is the biological category to which we have referred. In this he may have been influenced by the common habit of setting up life and thought as opposite extremes. But in any case, what he means by "creative evolution" is what

he claims to discover by the scientific method of mystical intuition, viz., a cosmic *élan vital*—or "life-urge," as our translators poorly render it—ever differentiating itself into new individuals, who inwardly experience its reality, its onward flow, when they turn from everything spatial and become immediately aware of their own being in time, that wholly inner experience of duration. Evolution is called creative, but as interpreters we must not read into this term much more than the constant origination of the novel as an ultimate and ultimately inexplicable fact. It contains only the slightest residue of the idea of causal agency. Causality in the modern sense of necessary and unconditional antecedence and succession of phenomena, Bergson admits to a place in mechanical science, that very useful but very artificial device which man, as practical, substitutes for reality; but this idea of mechanical causation is to be entirely eliminated from metaphysics. And yet Bergson can scarcely be said to have in mind the older idea of causality as virtually identical with creative *activity*, when he speaks of creative evolution. In other words, although he rejects as utterly inadequate all mechanistic philosophies of life and reality, and makes use of the image of a cosmic stream of life, or consciousness, flowing down into matter as into a tunnel, to emerge again in the line of development leading to man, still, he does not find it necessary to account for the origination of the new after the manner of the former creationist doctrine. As adaptation does not argue prior design, so evolution, as he conceives it, proves

nothing as to prior involution; activity may exist without a subject, and creation without a creator. It is not surprising, then, that many religious people are finding the philosophy of Bergson both fascinating and full of promise, and yet at the same time not a little perplexing.

Having been asked by the editor of the *Biblical World* for a brief article on the religious significance of Bergsonism, the writer wishes to call attention to two possibilities in connection with this topic. One may speak of religion from the point of view of Bergson's philosophy, or one may speak of Bergson's philosophy from the point of view of what one takes to be the best type of religion. On the one hand, how much of the religious view of the world and of life would this philosophy sustain? On the other hand, how much of Bergson's doctrine can find a place for itself in a religious philosophy of reality?

With the former of these two questions it is not easy to deal. Indeed one may surely be excused if he hesitates to answer for Bergson a question which that writer is not yet ready to answer for himself. Quite recently interviewers have been informed that he has not yet worked out the religious implications of his system. His method has been to face one group of problems at a time and to work out solutions by rigidly scientific processes; having dealt with matter, life, and consciousness, he is now at work upon the study of ethics; later on, it is possible that he may make religion his subject of special investigation; that he will ever have anything to give the world on that subject, however, he is by no means sure.

But Bergson is known to be deeply interested in the subject of religion, and he is especially sympathetic with religious mysticism. Not long ago he was engaged in a special study of the lives of some of the mystics; and in an interview he spoke approvingly of LeRoy's *Dogme et critique*, and quite warmly of Segond's *La prière*. On the same occasion he expressed himself somewhat as follows: "Theology and metaphysics must approach each other more and more closely; they must come to employ the same method [mystical intuition]. The true metaphysic will be an immediate vision of reality, and the mystical experience is certainly that."

Our other question is: How much of Bergsonism can be assimilated with advantage by modern religious philosophy? If we are to attempt an answer to this, we must first undertake a brief critique of the philosophy in question, with special reference to its religious bearings. It will be seen, before the end of this article is reached, that in the writer's opinion a considerable part of the philosophy of Bergson has positive religious value; but we must first express some less favorable criticisms.

With reference to his intuitional method, let it be said that Bergson is too sweeping in his negations. His anti-intellectualism is carried so far as to confine real knowledge to the immediately felt. This would cut the foundation from under any definite theism. For while vital religion has always made much of immediate experience, it has always claimed to gain real knowledge of a *transcendent* Object

through such experience. In all but the most extreme developments of mysticism, the religious Object still remains largely transcendent, even after it has entered into the religious experience of man. And for the knowing of the transcendent, representative ideas are required. We must make and employ concepts, not only in communicating thought, but even in thinking; and while "concepts without intuition are empty," it is no less true that "intuition without concepts is blind." Bergson is pragmatist enough to allow to concepts an indispensable practical value, but he is not pragmatist enough to find in such practical value a valid criterion of truth.

But while in the negative direction just noted Bergson carries his intuitionism too far, it is equally true that in its positive application he has not as yet—at least in any of his published works—carried it far enough. We could wish that so gifted an interpreter of life would take up seriously the task of applying his intuitional metaphysical method to the study of religious mysticism.

Corresponding to our two criticisms of Bergson's mystical method, there are two main criticisms to be made with reference to his use of the biological conception of creative evolution. He pushes the idea of life's creative process too far in one direction, while in another respect he does not apply it in a sufficiently thoroughgoing fashion. In general, spontaneous evolutionism is made unduly prominent at the expense of a genuinely creative activity.

It is remarked by Höfding, in his *Problems of Philosophy*, that meta-

physics consists in an interpretation of the whole through the part, this part being some element of the whole, selected as a *type-phenomenon*. Some philosophers take *matter* as this type-phenomenon, and from this part of reality they seek to learn the nature of the whole; others select *life*, and still others choose *thought*. Bergson's fundamental category, as we have seen, is the intermediate one of *life*, and by selecting it he has indeed been able to avoid the manifest one-sidedness of materialism at the one extreme and absolute idealism at the other. But why should matter be interpreted as a phase of life, any more than life as a phase of matter? And why should thought, intelligence, be degraded to the level of a mere biological utility, inferior to unintelligent instinct as a guide to truth, any more than it should be made the whole warp and woof of the universe? Why should we not leave matter, life, and thought side by side, as possibly irreducible elements of reality, rather than do violence to the nature of any one of them by prematurely explaining it as a phase of one of the others? And perhaps it may be possible to find some fundamental category which will do equal justice to all.

This leads me to speak of the other criticism of Bergson's use of the biological category: viz., that, although at times he interprets living as acting, he does not apply comprehensively enough the idea of life in its essential aspect of *creative activity*. This was the original, and is still, I take it, the real significance of the causal category. Of course Bergson is committed from

the start against making any fundamental use of the categories recognized by mechanical science; but causation, interpreted as creative activity, is no longer a mechanical concept. Moreover, where causation is creative activity, the cause is *something which acts creatively*, and what it is, is to be learned in the light of what it does. Bergson does not share this view, but that may be because he is required to reject it by some of his other doctrines, which are not themselves beyond criticism. If, as he claims, no intellectual processes can have any real knowledge-value, there can be no real knowledge of the transcendent; and if no knowledge of the transcendent, then no knowledge of any subject of active processes, as such. But a little more pragmatism, as we have already hinted, would have enabled our immediatist to use intellect as a means of arriving at genuine truth, and that without falling into the snare of a vicious intellectualism.

But from the point of view of this paper, what is to be said in criticism of Bergson in connection with this idea of creation is not simply that he does not think of it sufficiently in terms of activity, and of activity in relation to something acting—a criticism which we have yet to justify positively—but also that he does not apply it all in some cases where creative activity is the one category that can reduce the facts to rational order. I refer particularly to his doctrine of perception, as contrasted with his doctrine of memory. Memory, according to Bergson, is a genuine creative activity, it is the beginning of spirit. It creatively produces images

of selected portions of the past, and reads them into the present experience, thus transforming data of sense into the physical objects of the spatial world. If all these created memory-elements could be eliminated, there would be left the real object, matter, the data of “pure perception” or sense. There is a suggestion of Hegel here, but in his taking of the sense-elements as ultimate, simply “given,” Bergson is in agreement with practically all philosophy. And yet, unless we are greatly mistaken, it is just here, where Bergson is at one with all philosophy, rather than in some other places, where he differs from all previous thought, that we find the most fatally vulnerable point, the Achilles-heel, of his system. If sense-elements are simply *data*, things given, three alternatives present themselves. They may be regarded as the products of matter, either treated as ultimate by the materialist, or explained away in terms of idea by the idealist. Or, they may be regarded as products of some substance or substances which the human understanding can never know, as is supposed by the Agnostic. Or finally, if intellect itself be explained away, these sense-data must be themselves identified with matter; and here the perplexities of the Bergsonian metaphysics are the result. Life, which is empirically dependent upon pre-existent matter for its sustenance, is here made the originating cause of matter; and so the metaphysic which was to have dispensed with the transcendent and with all concepts has after all to suppose a transcendent, cosmic Life, which it knows, not immediately, but only by means of a concept—and that, remark-

ably enough, the previously rejected category of cause!

Our alternative suggestion we would offer as a hypothesis. Why not treat the so-called data of sense in the same way as the data of memory, and regard them as the created products of our own individual life, operating here as sense-activity in a manner analogous to its operation as memory? If sense-activity, the producing of the sense-qualities of physical objects on occasion of stimulation by those objects, can be regarded as an activity inherited from a long line of animal and human ancestors, in which it was a gradually developed habit, indispensable for proper adjustment to a physical environment, then a whole multitude of venerable philosophical problems are solved with a moment's consideration, and the way is opened up for a system of metaphysics, at once empirical, scientific, and satisfactory to the spiritual consciousness of man.

This will seem a good deal to say, and the limits of this article, already sadly transgressed, forbid its adequate defense. But what is meant may at least be indicated in a general way. The old and again new problem of realism or idealism is solved in a way that does justice to both sides, the independent reality of the physical object, and the creative activity of sense and mind in the constitution of its sense-qualities and those thought-elements which represent such qualities as are permanently objective. There is suggested, too, a unitary view of consciousness. It is to be regarded as the creative activity of the ego, the *psyche*—or whatever we may call the

subject of consciousness—in several different forms. In the form of sense-activity it is the producing of the qualities of sense and feeling; in the form of memory, imagination, and conception, it is, as Bergson says, the creative production of the images and symbols concerned; as judgment it is, as Dewey has long contended, the production, by means of an idea or predicate, of that particular change in reality which the practical purpose underlying the judgment required; and finally, the spiritual consciousness is seen to be creative activity under the guidance of ideals, themselves the products of the creative activity of the self—a view which is measurably close to Eucken's doctrine of *ein durchbrechendes, geistiges Leben*. After the explanation of consciousness will come the analogous interpretation of "subconsciousness." This is creative activity which in its effects, is, for all the world, *as if* it were conscious; only *we* are not, in our ordinary conscious activity, directly aware of it as conscious; nor are we able, as in the conscious life of others, to get quite convincing indirect knowledge of it as conscious.

This leaves us with matter, organic life, and God still to account for. But even here our concept of creative activity does not fail us. Much has been done by Hans Driesch, as well as by Bergson and others, to show that the presence and activity of another factor, in addition to purely mechanical forces, must be supposed, if we are adequately to explain biological development and the other phenomena of organic life. Here then we have physical life as creative activity on the part of

what we may, for the moment, consent with Driesch to call "entelechy."

Through Ostwald and others we have been familiarized with the interpretation of matter in terms of energy. Ostwald goes to the extreme of trying to explain the whole spiritual universe as being simply various forms of *physical* energy. We cannot and need not follow him in all this, but his energistic doctrine of matter, with some modifications, readily falls in with what has been said of creative activity. Our most scientific view of matter today is that it is something which affects other things, physical and psychical, creatively producing, whether with or without their co-operation, certain changes in them.

And as for the object of religious dependence, is not vital religion able to say that there is a Factor in reality which makes effectively, acts creatively, for uplift in the spiritual life, in response to the proper religious adjustment?

What is this spiritual uplift which comes through religious experience but the creative activity of a *Holy Spirit*?

And how come these varied creative activities of physical energy, vital energy, sense-activity, memory, imagination, judgment, subconsciousness, the spiritual life, and the divine or Holy Spirit in the religious life to be so marvelously co-ordinated and subordinated, unless this universe be indeed itself an Organism, permeated by one all-co-ordinating Life? Then would even the physical world be the Holy Body of that Being whom in religious experience we know as the Holy Spirit. And here would be a "higher synthesis" of pantheism and deism, of immanence and transcendence, preserving the values of each, while yielding to the faults of neither.

Now this is not the philosophy of Bergson; but it can scarcely be said to have no positive religious significance, and perhaps without Bergson we should not have come to think in just this way.

THE PRESENT VALUE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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A question that recurs to successive generations of biblical students is this: When men have accepted the main conclusions of the higher criticism, what is their attitude toward the Old Testament as one of the documents of our religion? Of course there are many

minds who do not find any problem here. There are conservative churches and conservative men in all the churches who accept the whole Bible as the word of God in the sense in which these words were used in the seventeenth century. This paper is not intended for them, but